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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000400

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ECON BM SN

SUBJECT: SINGAPORE PM LEE'S BURMA VISIT: BEATING AROUND THE BUSH

REF: A. SINGAPORE 936

¶B. SINGAPORE 911

¶C. RANGOON 379

¶D. RANGOON 358

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Singapore Prime Minister Lee visited Burma on March 30 and, contrary to international press reports and a preview by his foreign minister of an anticipated tough approach (ref A), he apparently did not directly urge Burma to give up its turn to chair ASEAN in 2006. However, we're told, PM Lee was satisfied that his more ambiguous approach yielded an SPDC willingness to "take into account ASEAN's collective interests" and to discuss the issue at the upcoming ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in Cebu. We have low expectations that "soft" ASEAN approaches will lead the SPDC generals to give up their much anticipated turn to chair ASEAN; they'll only do so on their own terms and in their own perceived best interests. End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) On April 4, Singapore Ambassador Thambynathan Jasudasen provided the COM and P/E chief with a readout of the March 30 visit to Burma of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. According to Jasudasen, PM Lee's "introductory" visit consisted of four parts: a lunch with ten local businessmen closely linked to Singapore trade and investment; a meeting with Prime Minister Lt Gen Soe Win; a meeting with SPDC Chairman Sr General Than Shwe; and an official state dinner.

"Give Us Your Dollars;" "Give Us Your Skies"

¶13. (C) PM Soe Win, joined by four GOB ministers, gave PM Lee a standard SPDC lecture on regime activities and achievements, with a particular focus on economic issues. Singapore, Soe Win said, accounted for over \$1.5 billion in investments in Burma, but the GOB wanted to reverse a precipitous decline in recent years. PM Lee, taking on board input from the Rangoon-based businessmen, said that Burma needed to complete an investment guarantee agreement and address the problems of current investors before trying to secure new ones. PM Lee also added that "there is severe competition for Singapore dollars, especially from China and India."

¶14. (C) The two Prime Ministers also discussed tourism (Lee pressed for more open skies, noting that Laos and Burma were the only countries in the region where Singapore airlines were restricted to a single destination) and human resources training (Singapore has trained nearly 2,000 Burmese civil servants since 1991 and is prepared to expand the program if the GOB so desires). On the East Asia Summit, PM Lee put forth GOS views that in order to distinguish the forum from "ASEAN Plus Three," the Summit should also include other countries such as India, Australia, and New Zealand. Amb. Jasudasen said that PM Soe Win agreed on the need to be inclusive, but did not elaborate further, leaving "uncertain" the GOB's view on the precise mechanism for the Summit.

Beating Around the Bush

¶15. (C) Jasudasen noted that neither side specifically raised or mentioned the ASEAN chairmanship, scheduled to rotate to Burma in 2006. Instead, PM Lee used a "business angle" to address the issue, suggesting that the region's economies are increasingly integrated and, consequently, more closely linked politically. "Therefore," Lee told Soe Win, "within ASEAN, we can't put up walls." PM Soe Win, according to Jasudasen, said that the GOB would "take into account" ASEAN's collective interests and the ASEAN Foreign Ministers "will meet and discuss these issues" in Cebu (April 10-12).

¶16. (C) PM Lee's subsequent meeting with SPDC Chairman Than Shwe, who had been briefed by PM Soe Win on the latter's encounter with Lee, was a shorter, "though nearly identical" version of the Soe Win meeting. Than Shwe told Lee that he was aware the two Prime Ministers had discussed "and agreed upon" various bilateral and multilateral issues. Than Shwe, consistent with previous meetings with visiting officials (ref D), was joined by the SPDC's top brass (except for S-1 Thein Sein, who was busy wrapping up the recent session of the National Convention), but dominated the meeting and was

the only one who spoke from the Burmese side.

Speak Loudly and Carry A Small Twig

17. (C) The COM raised international press coverage of PM Lee's visit, noting that many reporters had characterized Lee's message to the SPDC as "urging" or "pressing" Burma to give up its rotation to chair ASEAN. Jasudasen agreed that such an assessment was not entirely accurate, but said "it would be a never-ending task to correct every single media inaccuracy" and, he added, "this message helps domestically in Singapore where the PM is under pressure from members of Parliament to do something" about Burma.

18. (C) Amb. Jasudasen assessed that "only three or four ASEAN countries" (Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and maybe the Philippines) would consider suggesting that Burma "step aside" in 2006. Describing Singapore as "the hatchet man, always doing the dirty work," Jasudasen said that Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia would vehemently object to any tinkering with the rotation "because they could be the next target" of concerns over human rights and democracy issues.

Comment: Wink, Wink, Nudge, Nudge

19. (C) Amb. Jasudasen noted that PM Lee and PM Soe Win also held a 15-minute "four eyes" bilateral discussion without aides or interpreters and "it is not fully certain what was discussed." While it is possible that Lee was unambiguous in his private tete-a-tete with Soe Win, the readout we received tells us it is more likely that Singapore soft-peddled the ASEAN chair issue with the SPDC and happily let the press characterize the GOS's approach as "pressure." Jasudasen said that PM Lee was "quite satisfied" that the GOB had signaled an openness to take on board "ASEAN's interests" and is "prepared to discuss" related issues in Cebu.

10. (C) The Burmese generals know that there is no ASEAN consensus on the issue of bypassing Burma for the ASEAN chair rotation. They will use that to their advantage at upcoming regional meetings (Cebu and Kyoto) and we don't envision they will go quietly into the night on the basis of various "discreet prods" and "gentle nudges" (to quote a few press reports). The only way we see the generals giving up their much-anticipated glory of chairing ASEAN is if they do so on their own terms and in their own perceived best interests.

End Comment.

Martinez